
What did the days of the “creation week” consist of?

By C. Van Dam

Our starting point

What did the days of the “creation week” consist of? Were these days as we reckon days? Or were they long periods of time so that each “day” lasted thousands or even millions of years? There has been much controversy about this point and before we enter it, one thing must be clear. Decisive is what Scripture says about this. The Bible is the Word of God and is therefore normative also for this question. To the Scriptures we must submit. Considerations that arise from outside Scripture are secondary. For example, what an important figure in the history of the church said about the subject, or what science is currently teaching about it are all secondary considerations. Of first importance is what Scripture says. Indeed, we would not even know of the creation work of God in seven days if God had not revealed it to us in His Word. It is to that same Word that we therefore must turn for answers to our questions.

The meaning of “day”

What does Scripture say? If we turn to Genesis 1 and 2 and read these chapters carefully, we notice that the term “day” is used in different ways in these chapters. The context makes this clear. In Genesis 1:5, “day” refers to the time that it is light. “God called the light *Day* and the darkness He called *Night*.” However, in Genesis 2:4, “day” refers to a longer period of time, namely, the six days of creation. “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth, when they were created, in the *day* that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.” So we see two different meanings of “day.”

But what about each day of the creation work of God, the first, second, third, fourth day, etc.? What is meant by “day”? The answer must be that there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that these days were anything other than days, as we also reckon days, days that include daytime and nighttime.

Reasons for this position

In the first place, six times we read the words “there was evening and there was morning,” followed by the number of the day (Gen 1:5,8,13,19,23,31). This formulation shows that the author wanted there to be no doubt about how these days are to be interpreted. These are days that had an evening and a morning and were in this respect normal days. It will not do to try to drive a wedge between the first three days and those that followed; that is, those without sunlight and those with sunlight. Whatever the exact source of light was for the first three days, Genesis 1 makes it clear that all the days are to be perceived as the same. They are all days with an evening and a morning, days as man still experiences them.

Secondly, whenever “day” is modified by a number (and that happens over one hundred times in the first five books of the Bible alone), it always refers to a literal day. From a purely grammatical point of view, it is therefore highly unlikely that the

days of the creation week would have been anything different from what we normally consider a day. Consequently, current standard Hebrew dictionaries give the meaning of “day” in the passages under discussion as a regular day¹ and not as a long undetermined period of time. Similarly scholars commenting on the text, irrespective of whether they value Genesis as the Word of God or not, recognize that there is no justification for seeing aeons of time referred to.²

Thirdly, the fourth commandment reads: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day . . .” (Ex 20:8-11). It would make little sense to understand the term “days” in one part of the commandment literally (work six days and rest on the seventh) and understand it figuratively in another part (for in six days [millions of years!?] the Lord created). In this context it is noteworthy that nowhere in the Old Testament is “days” (the plural) used in any but a literal sense. If the days of the fourth commandment (in six days the Lord created) are actually ages or the like, then this is a unique use of the word and without any explanation or hint that it is symbolic for a long period of time.

Fourthly, if Adam lived in part of the sixth day and this day was a long period of time, how old did Adam then become? There is clearly no room for a long period of time. At the time of the birth of the third child of which Scripture specifically informs us, Adam was 130 years old (Gen 5:3).

Conclusion

The six days in which God created heaven and earth and all that is in them are to be understood as days and not long periods of time. To be sure, they were also special and unusual days. Certainly! These were the days God made the world! The first three days were also special because they had no sun to give the daylight. Unique in world history! But nevertheless these, too, could be called days with evening and morning. And so these were days as we experience them, with nightfall and morning, light and darkness.

Objections

Objections have been raised by those who reject the conclusion reached above. Let us consider the main points of disagreement since these objections include arguments from Scripture.

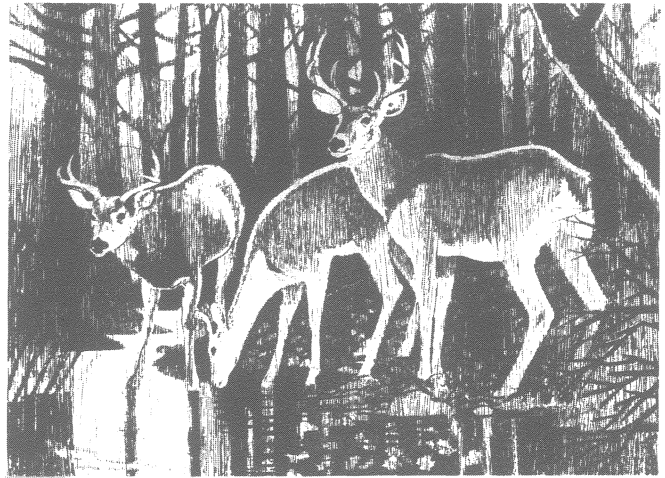
G.C. Aalders has written that “it is obvious that the creation day was limited by morning and evening, by the beginning and ending of the beaming light. Our 24-hour day includes the night and as such is a different concept in itself.”³ However, J.A. van Delden has correctly responded⁴ that if you want to speak rigidly in this vein, it is more consequent to say that the “day” of Genesis 1 refers to the night, for the text mentions

evening first! (“There was evening and there was morning, the first day.”) This is definitely not the direction to go. Genesis 1 clearly shows that the day was reckoned from the evening up to and including the next day (summarized in the word “morning”).⁵

2 Peter 3:8 is often referred to in order to argue that the days in Genesis 1 were not really days, but long periods of time. We read in that passage, “Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” But, notice that in this passage, “day” is a normal day. This passage does not support a figurative or nonliteral interpretation of “day” in Genesis 1. It does indicate that for God a day is *like* a thousand years, and a thousand years is *like* a day; but, not equal to a day! The point is that God is not limited as we are by time. He is God! And therefore, Peter suggests, the church should not despair. God can do in one day what would take man a thousand years! God hurries to come. That is the context of 2 Peter 3. If one applies this sense to the context of Genesis 1, then God can do in one day, what an evolutionist thinks should take thousands of years or more. A similar argument can be applied to Psalm 90:4. (“For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past.”)

Frequently the argument is heard that when Scripture says that God created everything in six days, this is only a manner of speaking. God does not really mean it literally. He is only using terms understandable to us as humans. He speaks, to use a learned word, anthropomorphically.⁶ Now it is true that God in His self-revelation condescended to the level of man and used words, expressions, and also means that man could comprehend. For example, although God does not have a literal back or face yet He showed Moses His back and hid His face (Ex 33:23). In this way God in His self-revelation came down to man and made Himself known. Yet we know that God is not a man for Scripture informs us that God is spirit (John 4:24). There is, therefore, no ambiguity about the identity of God in His self-revelation, for the Scriptures make clear what the meaning is. However, it is an entirely different proposition to say that God’s revelation in His Word cannot be taken for what it says, because what is written in Scripture is only a human way of speaking to us. Such a position would necessitate that the theologians or scientists decide what part of Scripture has to be reinterpreted or reworded so that we know what God actually meant to say. Can we improve on the way God speaks to us in His Word? Scripture says the Word is near to us (Deut 30:14; cf. Rom 10:8). God revealed exactly what He wanted to say and meant (cf. 2 Pet 1:21; 2 Tim 3:16). Once we start insisting on “re-translating” Scripture so that it is “understandable” for our age in order to show what God “really meant” to say, we are lost. Where do we stop? What is God’s idea and what is man’s? This is the misery of so much modern theology. But, God’s Word is clear and perspicuous. It is a lamp before our feet. Its intent and message is plain.

Another objection to understanding the days of creation literally is the insistence that the seventh day never ended. The proof is said to be the fact that the text of the creation account does not include with the seventh day the words “and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” The reason for this omission is said to be that the seventh day still continues for God is still resting from His work of creation. Now, if the seventh day is of such an extended length (so the reasoning goes), does this not suggest the same for the first six days of creation?⁷ In response, it should be noted that the order is different with the seventh day. The words “the seventh day” now come at the beginning and not at the end of this day. As such that is not so surprising, for God did not create on this day. In this respect this day was different from the preceding days for which a variety of creation acts could be mentioned. But



note, it is still called a day, with a number, just like the preceding six days, and it should be understood accordingly. There is absolutely nothing in the text to indicate that this seventh day never stopped.⁸

Another argument for seeing the seventh day as still continuing has been sought in John 5:17. In that chapter, we read of the Lord Jesus healing a lame man on the sabbath. When the Jews found this out, they persecuted Jesus “because He did this on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working still and I am working’ ” (v. 16b-17). On the basis of this passage it has been concluded that “Jesus’ reasoning is sound only if the Father acts *during His sabbath*; only on that condition has the Son the right to act similarly on the sabbath. . . . God’s sabbath, which marks the end of creation but does not tie God’s hands, is therefore co-extensive with history. Our Lord Himself did not see the seventh day of Genesis as a literal day”.⁹ However, this interpretation reads far more into the text than what it says! The point is that if the Father also works on the Sabbath (in His work of preservation and redemption), then so can the Son. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the Sabbath on which God is working is any other than the Sabbath that the Jews observe and on which the Lord heals.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above, we can conclude that the six days in which God created heaven and earth were just that, days with evening and morning. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest otherwise.

Why then has there been so much discussion and doubt sown on this point? There are other factors involved which affect one’s approach to the biblical text. We hope to look at these the next time, D.V.

1. See, e.g., W. Baumgartner et al., *Hebraisches und aramaisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, fasc. 2 (1974), 382.
2. See, e.g., J. Skinner, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary; 1930) 21; W.H. Gispen, *Genesis*, I (1974), 50.
3. G.C. Aalders, *Genesis*, I, 58.
4. J.A. van Delden, *Schepping en wetenschap*, (1977) 80f.
5. Cf. also the end of the preceding article in this series, “The First Day.”
6. A closely related theory is the so-called literary interpretation which “takes the form of the week attributed to the work of creation to be an artistic arrangement, a modest example of anthropomorphism that is not to be taken literally,” H. Blocher, *In the Beginning* (1984) 50.
7. See, e.g., H. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 56.
8. See, e.g., Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 77f, n.73.
9. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 57.